

From self-enhancement to self-transcendence: A comparison of therapeutic *versus* traditional meditation models

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“...you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.”
Colossians 3:9–10

‘man is not even master in his own house, his own mind’
Freud, 1962, p. 252

Abstract

Contemporary understandings of meditation often frame it as a technique of self-regulation aimed at enhancing wellbeing and reducing stress. This article critically examines this therapeutic model by contrasting it with traditional contemplative practices across religious traditions, including Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism. While both therapeutic and traditional forms of meditation share surface similarities—such as attentional training and the modulation of mental states—their underlying aims and conceptual frameworks diverge significantly. Therapeutic meditation, shaped by twentieth-century psychological and medical developments, prioritizes self-enhancement, emotional regulation, and functional adaptation to modern life. In contrast, traditional meditation practices are embedded within rich cosmological and ethical systems that aim at self-transcendence, involving the transformation or dissolution of the ordinary self and the cultivation of compassion, love, and union with a higher reality.

The article argues for a multidimensional approach to the study of meditation that incorporates traditional phenomenological maps of consciousness and recognizes hierarchical stages of contemplative development. It further highlights the limitations of current psychological models, particularly their lack of interpretative frameworks for adverse meditation experiences. By recovering the distinction between self-enhancement and self-transcendence, this work calls for a more nuanced engagement between psychology and contemplative traditions, one that acknowledges both the transformative potential and the complexities of meditative practice.

Today to meditate means to practice a particular kind of concentrative exercise. The related term “contemplation” has been used in the Christian tradition in a way that resembles more closely how we think of meditation today—contemplative prayer has been described as a practice of deep silence and special openness to God that is differentiated from vocal prayer and meditation, both of which involve more sensorial, imaginative, and affective elements (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2006, Part 4, section 1, chapter 3).

Meditation practices, which were originally developed by men and women who lived in monastic contexts or in natural dwellings (the desert or forests), have become part of mainstream popular culture. If in 2014 there were 4.1% of US inhabitants who had practiced meditation in the past 12 months, by 2017 the number had grown to 14.2% of the general population (Clarke et al, 2018). What do these numbers mean: Are the motivations driving people towards meditation practice today the same as one thousand years ago? And are the meditation practices used today different than before? And are we looking at the same type of outcomes? Although there are some similarities between past and present practices and goals, these *surface* similarities have been used by researchers to develop a monolithic understanding of meditation as a form of self-regulation, which has obscured the varieties of practices, goals, and outcomes of these practices. Here I will attempt to discern what differentiates therapeutic from traditional meditation, while arguing for a multidimensional study of meditation, which allows us to explore the traditional meditation maps and hierarchies of states of consciousness, as well as the possibilities of deep personal transformation, often associated with an erosion of self-interest, and an extraordinary expansion of compassion and love for others.

From Traditional to Therapeutic Meditation Practices

The earliest recorded writings on meditation suggest that these are exercises that aim to achieve a special kind mental focus. Think, for example, of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (third century CE) (Aranya, 1963/1983), one of the first recorded meditation manuals, where the practice leads to the cessation of mental fluctuations (*yogas cittavrtti nirodhah*), through a sustained exercise of attention. Or consider the practices of classical Daoism in the *Zhuangzi* (compiled from the third century BCE onward), where the technique of "inner cultivation" involved the focus of attention on one thing, often the breath, for a sustained period of time, with the aim of gradually emptying out everyday thoughts, perceptions, and emotions. Within Christianity, one of the favourite meditations recorded by the Desert Fathers is the recitation of the Jesus Prayer— "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on us sinners"— which would ideally become a ceaseless and effortless exercise, a kind of autonomic reflex that occurs in rhythm with one's natural breathing. There are many variations on how the Jesus Prayer can be practiced; but there is a sense that one progresses in stages — you start by repeating it vocally, from your lips it moves to your mind, and then finally to your heart. This gradation and deepening of meditation, as I will show later, is a recurrent theme in all religious contemplative traditions, which describe hierarchies of states of consciousness as one progresses through more refined contemplative stages (or rooms of the interior castle, as St Theresa of Ávila suggested).

There are various commonalities between the different models of meditation. First, they all seem to involve actions of attention, particularly of sustained concentration, with the aim of moving away from the usual flux of thoughts, sensations, and feelings. In this sense, they are effortful and require a sense of self-control, which ranges from being able to sit quietly for 15 minutes, to the kind of austere discipline we find in religious asceticism. Second, they all aim to affect some kind of change on the self, from the alleviation of stress to eliciting deeply altered states of consciousness. While religious contemplative traditions *explicitly*

acknowledge that there is something precarious, limited, or illusory about the everyday self, the therapeutic models only implicitly suggest this, as meditation is presented as an antidote to stressful urban life, a form of calming or quieting the mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

These *surface* commonalities between the plethora of meditation practices have given rise to various errors and misconceptions in the writing of modern scientists. Take, for example, this statement, part of the introduction of an article published in the journal *Science*:

Many philosophical and religious traditions teach that happiness is to be found by living in the moment, and practitioners are trained to resist mind wandering and to “be here now.” (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010, p. 932)

The opposite of this statement is closer to the truth: world religions are generally suspicious of the idea of living in the moment, or of a *Carpe Diem* (seize the day) mentality, and most meditation exercises are a clear example of that suspicion. Meditation practices tend to be effortful; they take time to master and to reap effects; and they are often embedded in other-worldly ideas that urge the practitioner to think beyond the present world and moment. And even the training to ‘resist mind wandering’ obscures the aim of the exercise, which demands focus only as a *means* to become absorbed in something greater than oneself (whether a Buddhist deity or Jesus, in order to *become like* them).

Given the enthusiasm for mindfulness, even amongst many Christians, it is important to correct a popular error: “living in the present moment” is not a traditional Buddhist prescription for a successful spiritual life. By the time mindfulness meditation was adapted from Theravada Buddhism into a form of therapy by Kabat-Zinn (2011), as a technique of paying attention to the present moment in a non-judgmental way, it had already undergone various mutations throughout the twentieth century. Even the original term for mindfulness, from the Pali *sati* and the Sanskrit *smṛti*, which means “memory,” has been retranslated by a Western Buddhist monk as “bare attention” (Nyanaponika, 1954), with the purpose of

presenting this as a scientific method for shaping the mind. In its origins, mindfulness was less an exercise of ‘bare attention’ than one of continuous remembrance of the teachings of Buddha.

From Self Enhancement to Self Transcendence

Today we tend to think of meditation as a technique that helps the individual to function better in this world, as a kind of *self-enhancement* method. This is characteristic of therapeutic types of meditation developed throughout the twentieth century. Yet the historical development of meditation is clearly rooted in something altogether different: the purpose of meditating is not to become more accomplished or resilient, but to transcend the world and the everyday self. The aim of meditation was more often to eclipse the everyday self, with its myriad passions and frustrations, than to foster self-enhancement. How did these practices, that aimed to deeply transform the self, metamorphosed into self enhancement techniques? There is a historical and sociological trajectory of how the changes brought about by industrialization generated what some in the 1920s called *Americanitis* — a kind of social neurosis whereby people feel in a state of constant tension. This realization led the medical doctor Edmund Jacobson to develop the first therapeutic meditation practice: progressive muscular relaxation. This became popular as a therapeutic method with the publication of Jacobson’s book *You Must Relax: A Practical Method of Reducing the Tensions of Modern Living* (1934), a technique that is still taught and practiced by many cognitive-behavioural psychotherapists today. Recall that the term ‘stress’ only started being used in the way that we do today from the 1950s onwards. It is not a mere coincidence that some decades later, the first therapeutic model of Buddhist mindfulness meditation was named *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction*. Similarly, the rise of meditation science in the early 1970s, mostly due to the efforts of the founder of Transcendental Meditation, very much sought ways of

calming the mind and body (the first set of articles published in *Science* and the *American Journal of Physiology* were intended to show how this technique reduced oxygen consumption and heart rate) (Orme-Johnson, 2021).



Figure 1: Progressive muscular relaxation being used in an antenatal class in England in the 1950s (see Nathoo, 2021).

From a plain psychological perspective, it is not immediately obvious what may be different in therapeutic meditation when compared to traditional religious models. On the surface, they both involve attentional focus and aim to have an effect on how the everyday self feels and thinks. In this sense, they both seem to involve processes of self-regulation whereby one has greater control over oneself. There are, however, at least two important differences at the conceptual and practical levels. *Conceptually*, while therapeutic meditation aims to enhance the functioning of the ordinary self, by making us less stressed or depressed and hence increase wellbeing, meditation traditions challenge this functional self and propose models

which, more than seeking to regulate ordinary consciousness, actively challenge it in order to *craft a new self*.

At the *practical level*, therapeutic meditation practices are soothing: they aim to calm the mind and provide emotional comfort. By being focused on stress release their engagement with processes of emotion and imagination is very limited. Religious contemplation, on the other hand, use multiple resources including an intensification of emotions, sensations, and imagination (often with the use of visualization). Examples across traditions include the Medieval Jewish practice of letter permutation that consists of mentally combining Hebrew letters taken from biblical verses: “to turn them over and roll them quickly until your heart is warm with the rolling. And when you feel that your heart is very warm . . . you are ready to accept the [divine] affluence” (Scholem, 1960); St Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises* that use emotional exercises of contrition, as well as the imagination and the senses by visualising oneself in various episodes of the Gospels, or the highly absorbed states associated with visualisation of icons in Eastern Christianity, or of Buddhist and Hindu deities. There is no doubt that the aim of such intense exercises is to both *challenge* the status quo of the everyday self and to transform it: by visualising a perfected self you become absorbed by it, and eventually become *it* (e.g. deification in the Eastern Christian tradition). There is no equivalent to this process of radical self-transformation in therapeutic meditation. If we were to translate this process into plain psychological terms, we could say that what they are saying is something like: ‘you become what you focus on’ — for good and bad. What occupies your mind will shape how you think and feel. By focusing on the perfect self, whether an awakened Buddha or a transfigured Jesus, you are engaging in a process which both destabilises the ordinary self and aims to radically transform it.

This leads us to consider another contrast concerning the narratives offered by meditation. Therapeutic techniques suggest a conservative narrative, where you let go worries and relax — but you relax into the prevailing narrative of everyday life. In this sense, therapeutic techniques remind one of Marx's critique of religion as something placating, that alleviates the pains of everyday life. Meditation traditions, on the other hand, provide an aspirational narrative that fractures ordinary reality. The visualisation of a decaying corpse in Buddhist practices or the ascetical exercises of retreating from the world and one's body undoubtedly aim to disrupt our ordinary perception while, at the same time, projecting the self into an interior space embedded within a cosmological narrative of progressive ascension. This interiority is found across all meditation traditions — the *Yogasutras* indicate that consciousness should contract inwards as a tortoise contracts its limbs into its shell; likewise, St Augustine advocates to move one's awareness inwards, into the interior man, if one wants to find God.

The tension between self enhancement and self transcendence goals in meditation models is not entirely new. Meditation is inherently creative and experiential. True, these techniques were developed to craft a new self, which in great part denied the world and tamed bodily desires. But a crucial part of this process is an extraordinary control of body and mind—even if, paradoxically, the aim is to entirely let go of that controlling self. In the process of experimenting with these practices, it was found out that the ability to modulate one's mind and body had various benefits, from intensely pleasurable sensations to physical healing. The practice of meditation with such utilitarian aims has been known and criticised for a long time. For example, in the classical Daoist text, Zhuangzi, we find a criticism of those who practice meditation techniques with the sole aim of prolonging their longevity, instead of seeking deeper self-transformation:

To huff and puff, exhale and inhale, blow out the old (breath) and take in the new, do the (gymnastic positions of the) “Bear Stride” and the “Bird Stretch,” and to be interested in nothing more than longevity, these are the methods of those who practise the “guiding and pulling” exercises, those who nourish the body and who try to attain the longevity of Ancestor Peng. . . . But to attain longevity without guiding and pulling, to forget everything and yet possess everything, to be serenely without limit yet have many wonderful things follow you, this is the Way of Heaven and Earth, the Potency of the Sage.” (Zhuangzi 15; Graham, 1981).

Mapping Contemplative Stages of Self-Transcendence

The interest in the study of consciousness that emerged in the 1990s has led to a proliferation of theories of consciousness, but no consensual model has emerged. A par with it, there has been an increase in the study of non-ordinary or altered states of consciousness but, so far, there has been minimal engagement with the various hierarchical maps of consciousness suggested by the meditation traditions.

Within each meditation tradition, we have not one but various maps of a gradation of states, starting with stages still associated with external stimulation (using breathing techniques or vocal prayer), to the higher ones, where the maps suggest very reified states where not only one does not experience external sensory stimulation, but new ‘internal senses’ may emerge, as suggested here:

“The first kind of prayer I experienced which seems to me supernatural I should describe as one which, despite all our efforts, cannot be acquired by industry or diligence, though we can

certainly prepare for it, and it must be a great help if we do. This prayer is an interior recollection felt in the soul, which seems to have acquired new senses, corresponding to its exterior senses, and appears desirous of withdrawing from outward tumult.” (Theresa of Ávila, *Spiritual Relations*, V).

From Hindu tantric maps, which detail a hierarchy of cosmological stages that are mapped onto the body, going up from the root of the spine to the crown of the head, to Jewish Merkabah where one progressively ascends through celestial realms, to John Climacus’ Ladder of Divine Ascent, where one moves from an external stage of renunciation from the world and physical desires, moving onto the practice of virtues and control of passions, until one reaches the higher stages of pure love and union with God —meditation traditions offer us rich phenomenological maps of non-ordinary states of consciousness. Psychology, including psychology of religion, has difficulty in engaging with descriptions that can be detailed and nuanced and often resorts to the use of overarching categories, such as ‘mystical’ or ‘noetic’ experiences. In doing so, it is not only limiting the scope of experiences presented in these accounts, but it is equally missing the complexity and potential complications that may arise in this interior journey of self-transformation.

Let’s take one example from the Eastern Christian tradition, where they speak of the possibility of ‘seeing the Light of God’:

[The elder] asks: “What did you see, my child?”

— “A light, my father, a sweet sweet light; and my mind does not know how to describe it to you . . . At once the space of my cell vanished and the world disappeared. I was left alone with this light . . . There was ineffable joy, which is still in me, and great love and desire, so that streams of tears flowed out of me, as you see now.” (Ethical 5 in Alfeyev, 2000, p. 22)

Categorising this as a type of mystical experience obscures the complex map of states of consciousness where this experiences sits, as well as ignoring the critical enquiry which always accompanies meditation (except within the modern therapeutic model). To expand on the “Divine Light” example, this contemplative experience became the subject of a major controversy in the Eastern Christian tradition: was this a true vision of God’s light, or something from one’s deeper mind—or even a delusion? Reflections such as this are a norm within meditation traditions. The journey inwards towards radical self-transformation is both arduous and perilous. Accounts of ‘meditation sickness’ are abundant in the Buddhist traditions, as are the warnings about self-delusion in the contemplative path also clear in other traditions, including the Christian one, as pointed out by St John of the Cross:

And I am appalled at what happens in these days – namely, when some soul with the very smallest experience of meditation, if it be conscious of certain locutions of this kind in some state of recollection, at once christens them all as coming from God, and assumes this is the case, saying: “God said to me...”; “God answered me...”; whereas it is not so at all, but, as we have said, it is for the most part they who are saying these things to themselves. (Ascent of Mount Carmel, II, 29, 4)

The traditional models of meditation are both critical and suspicious of the experiences emerging from these practices, because they distrust the ordinary or illusory self, while acknowledging that it has a wondrous capacity to trick itself into self-enhancement instead of transcendence. Another reason is, of course, the suggestion presented in most traditions (including Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism) that there are various spiritual agents that actively attempt to prevent one from moving across the hierarchy of consciousness stages. Take this example from the Desert Fathers:

The devil appeared to a monk disguised as an angel of light, and said to him "I am the angel Gabriel, and I have been sent to you." But the monk said "Are you sure you weren't sent to someone else? I am not worthy to have an angel sent to me." At that the devil vanished. (The Desert Fathers, edited by Ward, 2003).

By contrast, the therapeutic models of meditation have shown, until recently, an absolute trust in the positive outcomes of meditation experience. It is hard to conceive why mainstream psychology would develop such an altogether benevolent view of practices which aim to change ordinary consciousness. The possible reason behind this blind trust is how, historically, therapeutic meditation from the 1960s onwards was heavily influenced by the New Age movement's highly individualistic stance, with its firm belief that one's individual resources and spiritual experiences suffice to transform oneself. The idea that one should trust one's spiritual experiences without scrutiny from others or even self-criticism is not entirely new — see Ronald Knox's work on *enthusiasm* across Christian history — but it has reached a kind of climax with therapeutic meditation, particularly mindfulness. Such uncritical enthusiasm for the outcomes of meditation practice exemplifies how mindfulness psychology researchers entirely ignored the literature from the 1970s-80s, which contained warnings from founding figures of Cognitive-Behaviour therapy about the potential dangers of meditation, including Albert Ellis and Arnold Lazarus.

This landscape has rapidly changed in the past 10 years, in part stimulated by my work with various collaborators (e.g. Farias and Wikholm, 2015), where we summarized the scientific and historical literature on the potential adverse effects of meditation. Some prominent mindfulness scientists fought back, claiming that meditation adverse effects were extremely rare, and only happened when one had an extreme practice — like running a marathon unprepared. They were wrong. A few years later, we published a systematic review

of meditation studies from 1970-2018 showing that over 8% of participants had experienced some kind of negative affect (Farias et al, 2020). This is a summary of the various symptoms:

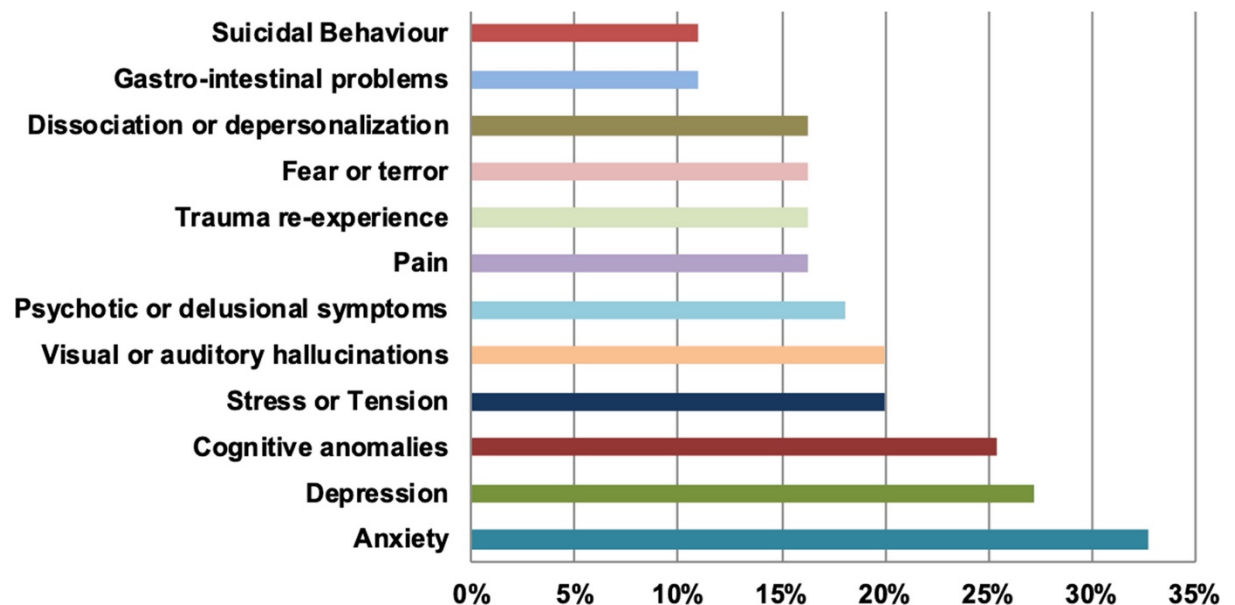


Figure 2: Most common types of meditation adverse events (Farias et al, 2020)

The new literature that emerged on meditation adverse effects has confirmed that they are not rare and they may be even more common than expected, with new survey evidence suggesting that around 20% of meditators experience some kind of unpleasant or negative effect (Pauly et al, 2022).

More interestingly for the purpose of this article, which compares therapeutic versus traditional models of meditation, is how one tries to make sense of these adverse effects. The therapeutic model is, of course, lacking any meaningful map or cognitive framework to help make sense of these experiences, except those from psychopathology. This quote from a meditator who suffered a serious meditation adverse event poignantly illustrates this lack of a meaningful map:

It was an awful time ... I went to many teachers and got a whole bunch of advice ...
[But] the supposed experts didn't know what was going on ... I spoke with [a well-known

and well-respected meditation teacher]. He said it was a sign of my mind becoming more concentrated and that I should do some serious retreat time ... I went to a psychic ... I got acupuncture twice a week ... I went to Tibetan doctors, as some said it was an energetic disturbance; that all my energy is flowing into my head ... I did everything the teachers told me to do ... nothing helped ... That went on for about three years ... Meanwhile I was like: what the hell is true, which worldview is true?... So, in addition to being completely scarred and dysfunctional *I didn't know what belief system to take on.* (my emphasis) (Mckay, 2022).

There have been various criticisms from Western Buddhist at the lack of an ethical framework within therapeutic mindfulness meditation, which has made this practice a tool for enhancing productivity rather than fostering liberation from the wheel of birth-rebirth (Purser, 2019). But the ethical void appears to simply be a consequence of the stripping of any meaningful framework to scrutinise and navigate meditation experiences, a map that provides some orientation to the meditator. Without such maps, which include a compass of where one starts (the faulty self) and is supposed to end (self-transcendence leading into sanctification/deification in the Christian tradition), the very association between meditation and improved ethical behaviour is eroded (for a critical meta-analysis of the attempt to show the prosocial effects of therapeutic meditation, see Kreplin et al, 2018).

These traditional maps can also help making sense of adverse effects. In this respect, the attempt by mindfulness researchers to use facile models of the mind, such as the metaphor of mindfulness as a gym for the mind, has been plainly unhelpful. It would have potentially been more interesting to revisit psychodynamic suggestions, including Jung's (1954) concept of the shadow, or Grof's (1981) work on 'spiritual emergencies' — when spiritual practice may lead one to experience something deeply unusual and uncontrollable. As it stands, we are simply left with a potential pathologizing of these adverse experiences; the current

psychological models of health and illness, or of consciousness, do not provide any meaning to them.

I have been speaking rather abstractly about maps and hierarchies of states of consciousness. It is important to note that one cannot read traditional descriptions of meditation practices as if they were modern self-help manuals; they are always embedded in a rich fabric of ideas that were used to examine and validate the meditation experiences and guide the spiritual development of the practitioner. A second word of caution is that each tradition offers various maps, and not a single one. This can be daunting for psychologists seeking a unified model but it makes perfect sense from the perspective of serious explorers of the *homo interior*: the creative ferment emerging with the long term practice of meditation almost inevitably begs for differences and unique possibilities to emerge. Take the case of the historical Buddha, who was living and practicing within a Hindu cosmology, and instead of experiencing the eternal self described in the Hindu scriptures, he found that all is flow and transition.

But these differences do not, in any way, undermine the sense of steps or stages, a hierarchical map of progressively purified states of consciousness. Below I present such a map, where the initial stages include the practice of vocal and devotional prayer, followed by spiritual reading and mental prayer, and then leading into deeper states where one might say that the enhanced self-control required in the first stages disappears, as one is taken over by an altogether different logic, or Grace; this is also the stage where one may feel the emergence of internal organs, as Theresa of Ávila refers above. From an everyday psychological perspective, it is hard or impossible to translate into cognitive or emotive processes the experiences of the last two stages, or even differentiate between them. Likewise, for Buddhism and Hinduism, though this shared difficulty does not imply that they are referring to states of consciousness which are identical with or similar to the ones

described for Christianity — I don't think they are, although there are various common elements from the behavioural (e.g. ascetic practices leading to a 'reversal of the flow of the body'; Flood, 2004) to the moral dimensions (enhancing positive qualities and reducing the destructive ones).

Degrees of Christian Prayer and Meditation
Contemplatio/ unio: a mystical state where one attains a perfect vision of God; also described as a unified participation in God's inner love, or as a spiritual wedding (matrimonium).
Consideratio/ illuminatio: a gratuitous (God-given) state of peace and spiritual vision, but not definitive as one's vision is still imperfect — as in a mirror (speculum)
Meditatio: a state of silent prayer consisting of deep concentration on the gifts of God
Recollection: a non-thinking state of withdrawal from of the senses, where one becomes passive in order to receive spiritual graces
Mental Prayer: an analytical method of prayer using discursive reason in order to achieve a deeper understanding; often used in combination with a mental image of a devotional object.

Lectio Divina: a form of prayer described as spiritual reading, which is accompanied by a sense of stillness and calm
(Affective prayer) devotional prayer associated with feelings of reverence and love
(Vocalic Prayer) liturgical discipline, including the verbalization of petitions and prayers

Table adapted from Silva (2021).

Let us not forget that the aim of Christian meditation is to form a dialogical union with God. This contrasts with the *Yogasutras* where one reaches a state no longer enclosed in object or subject; in other words, there no longer is a consciousness of who might be conscious. This dissolution of the individual into the Absolute is at odds with the individuation of the Jewish-Christian worldview, where the real self is found in an inner dialogue with God. Having said this, even within Christianity there are expressions of closeness to God where the differentiation between the transformed self and God can virtually be absent – e.g. “we have to come to the state of being nothing in order to enter into the same nature that He is” (Eckhart, 1979, trans. Walshe, p. 66).

Within the varieties of maps of consciousness, where one moves from a self rooted in the tumult of physical desire and cognitive-emotive confusion and suffering, to a purified and transformed self, it is important to remember that at the apex of meditation one can find a way back into the body — but a transformed body, like that of the resurrected Christ. One of my personal favourite illustrations of this is the hierarchy presented in the *Gift of Tears*, a contemplative practice which bears the marks of a deep engagement with emotions, which are progressively purified as one moves

from tears of compunction to tears of desire for God. First described by Gregory Magnus (540-604) this contemplative practice was very popular in the Middle Ages. Adam de Perseigne (13th CE) wrote about seven progressive stages of ascent, where the last stage showed a bodily transformation:

“First, one is moved to tears, because, remembering its evil deeds, it fears having to suffer eternal punishments for them. Then, when fear is absorbed by a prolonged anxiety of bitterness, a certain security is born in it because it is persuaded that it can obtain pardon, and the spirit is inflamed with love for the celestial joys. He who first wept for fear of being led to torture, then begins to weep bitterly for feeling the delay in entering the kingdom. The spirit contemplates what the choirs of angels are, imagines the company of the blessed spirits, sees interiorly the greatness of the divine majesty. Then, his lament for not possessing the unalterable goods becomes even more poignant than were his sobs when he feared eternal evils. Thus, it happens that perfect compunction of fear leads the soul to compunction of love.

The fifth liquefaction occurs when the soul, possessed by an ardent charity, without counting anything, gives its person and its goods to works of the active life. The sixth liquefaction occurs when the soul melts entirely and is subtilized in the delights of celestial contemplation [...]. Finally, in the seventh liquefaction the soul flows and dissolves entirely in the sweet odour of its good reputation (*boni nominis*), for the consolation of a great number, when it exhales, with the aromatic sweetness of an odoriferous renown, to the point of being able to say of it [quoting another verse from the Song of Songs], 'Your name is an ointment poured out' [Song 1.3]. Hence, the Song says that the soul is like a column of smoke from the aromas of myrrh and incense [Song 3.6]."

The possibility of an inner transformation being equally reflected in the body can be found across traditions, from the Hindu Tantric schools where meditation practice involving visualization of deities leads to the creation of a new body, to the unusual phenomenon of the *Rainbow Body* of Tibetan Buddhist ascetics who spent long periods meditating in caves and whose physical bodies shrink and disappear after death.

By mentioning these extraordinary phenomena, I am not attempting to make a case for a science of the miraculous or the paranormal, though there is a plethora of such manifestations that accompanies meditation practices. I am rather more interested in noting the embodied character of these practices — at the start with extreme self-control and at the end with a transformation of the body — which present an understanding of the self which is way more unified than any the dualistic theories advocated by modern psychology (mind-body, analytical-intuitive processing, etc).

Conclusions: The Transformed Heart

A multidimensional study of meditation must also consider that, even when practiced alone in a cave, these practices are done not for the sake of the individual alone but they inherently gravitate towards the communal (I do not have the space here to reflect upon the interpersonal aspect of these exercises, but suffice it to say that across traditions there are endless anecdotes about meetings with saints or more advanced practitioners — and that these meetings are often transformational; eg. within Buddhist contexts, one may become immediately ‘awakened’ when meeting such a special person). The communal aim of the self-transformation brought about by meditation practices is present across traditions but has acquired a particular charisma in some — the *Tibetan Buddhist* bodhisattva, for example, is an awakened person who chooses to

remain in our earthly realm of illusion for the sake of helping others to liberate themselves. And Christianity, of course, is built on the very ideal of loving others as oneself, regardless of who the *other* may be, as the *Cloud of Unknowing* so poignantly reminds us of:

“A perfect worker in contemplation has no regard to any specific person for his own sake, whether kin or stranger, friend or foe;... so that for him all those who torment him and cause him distress on earth are his particular friends, and he feels moved to desire as much good for them as he would for the closest friend he has” (Spearing, 2001, p. 49).

Here, again, we have an apparently unbridgeable gap between the religious meditation traditions and psychology that is mostly focused on individual outcomes. However, there are various possibilities of moving across this gap. I have already mentioned the rich maps of consciousness. Let me end by referring to the *heart*, as conceived with the Abrahamic traditions, as an organ which has a particular value (*Blessed are the pure in heart*), that unifies cognition with emotion. Pascal’s often cited quote— that the heart has reasons which reason knows nothing of — has been entirely misread by cognitive psychologists. Pascal is probably the last heir of a long religious philosophical tradition, which perceives the heart as a unified organ that, when pure, has the ability to acquire direct knowledge of the sacred. And it is from this way of thinking about the heart, not only metaphorically, but as a physical-spiritual organ which can sense and know, that a rich and sophisticated set of heart-centered meditation practices emerged in Christianity, which included extremely focused attention, visualization, breath modulation, and repeated recitation of short prayers. This tradition suggests that heart-centered meditation allows a purification of the heart, whereby one develops the possibility of seeing the world as God does. Although this tradition sits on

the opposite extreme of the Hollywood saccharine theme of romantic affection, there is something in the motto of 'Follow your heart' that quite possibly derives from the old understanding of a heart that can acquire a special knowledge; not an incentive to follow the heart of ordinary passions, but to follow that knowing, purified heart that no longer hopes for, but directly sees the wonders of God.

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